



RESEARCH REPORT

Opening a New School in Allentown, Pennsylvania

A Case Study of Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays Elementary School

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January 2025



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by Enterprise Community Partners. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

The authors are also grateful to Samantha Shaak, Anna Ravindranath, and James Carter for their feedback on earlier drafts; to David Hinson for his editorial and design support; and to the individuals in Allentown who talked with us about their community.

Executive Summary

This report is one of two case studies focused on new public schools in Memphis, Tennessee, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. In partnership with Enterprise Community Partners and their partners in these communities, we have explored the process of opening new schools and how school openings and boundary decisions affect access to opportunities for children. The case studies aim to understand the decisionmaking behind new school openings—why a new school is planned, where it is sited, how its facilities are designed, and where its boundaries are drawn—and the implications for racial and socioeconomic equity. We also examine how and whether housing characteristics are considered in new school openings.

Case Study Overview

For this case study, we investigated the 2020 opening of a new, state-of-the-art public school, Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays Elementary School (Hays), in the Franklin Park neighborhood in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Within the majority-Hispanic, working-class population of Allentown, the Franklin Park neighborhood has a higher poverty rate and a larger Hispanic community relative to the city. Franklin Park residents face housing instability, barriers to economic opportunity, and worse health outcomes than residents in other neighborhoods. The need for a new school building in Franklin Park stemmed from Allentown School District's (ASD's) challenges funding deferred maintenance and school facility improvements. Hays replaced two elementary schools in Allentown whose buildings were more than a century old, overcrowded, and in poor condition.

In many ways, ASD's challenges are emblematic of those of many other urban public school districts nationwide and are rooted in a history of segregation and disinvestment.¹ In a recent report, we discussed the link between residential racial segregation, school segregation, and inequities in school resources and student outcomes (Gallagher et al. 2023). Segregation of neighborhoods has been replicated and perpetuated in schools through unequal geographic school boundaries, concentrating children of color in high-poverty and underresourced schools and districts and depriving them of equitable opportunities and outcomes (Orfield et al. 2014). In Allentown and other urban districts where tax revenues are lower than in the wealthier and whiter suburbs, inadequate tax funding—further limited since 2020 by COVID-19 pandemic-related enrollment declines—have strained their ability to invest in facilities or to support the provision of transportation and resources.

Here, we document and contextualize the story of Hays, with a focus on

- the decisions that led to its opening, its design, and who it serves;
- who led decisionmaking, whose voices were heard in the process, and how the community was engaged in decisionmaking; and
- implications for equity through the process and the school's outcomes since its opening.

Key Findings

1. **The new facility was built to serve students from two schools that were in disrepair.** Allentown School District decided to build Hays to replace two old, deteriorating elementary school buildings identified in a feasibility study as needing urgent investment.
2. **Hays was designed to include a community services wing.** The school was designed with state-of-the-art learning spaces and an attached community service wing to house colocated service providers to provide resources and to support the needs of the families served by the school, who may have limited access to food, health care, and high-quality early learning opportunities.
3. **Zoning decisions were largely driven by walking distance and accessibility for students with special needs.** ASD does not offer transportation to students attending neighborhood schools, so proximity and safe walking routes were major deciding factors for selecting a site for the new school building and for drawing the school's boundaries. Zoning plans for Hays also aimed to relieve overcapacity at neighboring schools and to provide a closer option for students with special needs.
4. **Many stakeholders were consulted during the planning process, but some were informed at a late stage or were left out altogether.** The district engaged community members for their input on the school's name, resources, and rezoning plan, but some stakeholders felt Hays would have benefited from more authentic and sustained engagement with the Franklin Park community.

Takeaways

1. **Allentown is addressing a backlog of needs in underresourced schools with local, state, and federal resources.** School infrastructure requires huge investment that can be difficult to fund

with local resources, particularly in lower-income communities. Allentown is making some initial strides, but greater state and federal resources are necessary to address funding inequities for Allentown and other underresourced districts in need of facilities improvements and would support infrastructure that benefits both students and their communities.

2. **Deeper and more sustained community engagement can lead to better decisions by the district and more community buy-in.** Allentown and other districts undergoing school closures, openings, or shifting boundaries can strategically and meaningfully engage community members by building trust, supporting community organizing, sharing information transparently and accessibly, and seeking and incorporating feedback early and throughout. Strong community voices can influence state, municipal, and school district policies related to infrastructure, transportation, and community engagement.

Opening a New School in Allentown, Pennsylvania

This case study of the 2020 opening of Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays Elementary School in the Franklin Park neighborhood in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is one of two cases the Urban Institute (Urban) team investigated in partnership with Enterprise Community Partners (Enterprise) and a local partner in Allentown, the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health (Pool Institute for Health). In these case studies, we aimed to understand the decisions that shape new school openings and how much school boundary and resource allocation decisions affect equitable access to opportunities. To draw lessons for Allentown and other communities, we used an equity lens to explore local perspectives on the decisionmaking process that determined whether a school should be opened, what the school would look like, where it would be located, and who it would serve. We sought to understand whose voices were heard and who is benefiting from the new school. In our analysis, we asked whether there are lessons for Allentown and other communities—for their school districts and for other local, state, and federal stakeholders—about how to advance equity for students in the process and outcomes of new school openings.

Case Study Approach

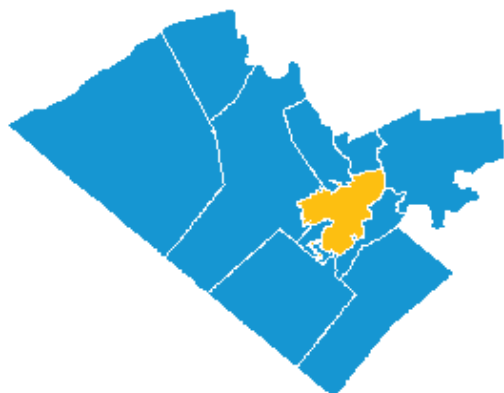
We selected case study sites from places where Enterprise Community Partners, our funder, had strong existing partnerships. Enterprise works with the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health in the Franklin Park neighborhood to support the development of place-based, cross-sector partnerships between housing, health, social services, and other stakeholders. We decided to focus on a single school opening in Allentown. This focus allowed us to explore the story of the school and its boundaries and how this story is situated in the larger context of the school district and community. To accomplish this, we interviewed six stakeholders involved in the school opening and community, did desk research using publicly available resources, and analyzed school data. Hays Elementary in Franklin Park was the first school to be constructed in Allentown in 10 years. See the appendix for additional information about our case study approach.

Community Context for Hays Elementary

FIGURE 1

Allentown School District in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania

Allentown School District (yellow) is located in southeast Lehigh County (blue)



Note: Allentown School District boundaries were georeferenced based on information available on Allentown School District's website.

The racial and ethnic makeup of Allentown, once a predominantly white city, has undergone major shifts in the past 50 years.² Attributable in part to the migration of Puerto Ricans and other Latine people, more than half of Allentown residents today are Latine (table 1). Despite this diversity, the county and city are highly racially and economically segregated. Allentown city residents experience poverty at greater rates than the county overall, and Latine residents are concentrated in Allentown city while the county remains predominantly white and non-Hispanic. Of note, case study interviewees often compared the city of Allentown with the rest of Lehigh County in terms of demographics and such characteristics as school quality, but they did not frequently distinguish Allentown and the Franklin Park neighborhood where Hays is located. Our data show that Franklin Park is a densely populated neighborhood home to a larger share of the Latine population, with more than two-thirds of residents identifying as Latine and one in four residents living in poverty.

FIGURE 2

Franklin Park Neighborhood in Allentown

Franklin Park's census tracts 18 and 20 (yellow, from left to right) are located near downtown in central Allentown (blue)



Source: 2019 US Census Bureau shapefiles.

TABLE 1

Demographics of Franklin Park (Tract 18 and 20) and the Broader Community

Measure	Tract 18	Tract 20	Allentown	Lehigh County
Total population	4,640	6,189	125,250	372,492
Hispanic/Latine (any race)	68%	70%	55%	26%
Black	15%	6%	10%	6%
White	15%	18%	30%	62%
Speak a language other than English at home (older than 5)	63%	54%	48%	25%
Live in poverty	23%	26%	23%	12%

Source: 2021 American Community Survey data, five-year estimates.

Notes: Estimates are rounded to the nearest whole percentage. This table shows the population of Hispanic/Latine people who identify with any race and the population of Black and white people who are not Hispanic/Latine.

Interviewees said Franklin Park residents experience similar challenges regarding economic opportunities as many other Allentown residents. Allentown has become a manufacturing and distribution hub, with Walmart and Amazon warehouses located outside the city. This employment is often a 45-minute drive from where residents live, if they are not using the public transit system interviewees described as unreliable. “It’s not an easily navigated system, nor is it a cheap system, especially if you are underresourced,” one interviewee said. And, as two stakeholders noted, this employment has brought work hours outside the 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday workweek, with some parents working second or third shifts in the late night and early morning. The distance and the working

hours of these major employers pose a challenge for transportation and child care, meaning, for example, that parents cannot pick up their kids from school easily.

Housing stability and quality are major issues for Franklin Park residents, based on an Enterprise analysis that assessed the housing and education landscape in the neighborhood (Enterprise Community Partners 2022). The assessment found that Franklin Park has a high share of renters (up to 78 percent) with high rental costs, leaving more than half of renters cost burdened. One in five renter households was evicted in 2021, resulting in homelessness and displacement. With a limited housing supply, overcrowding is common, as landlords rent rooms illegally, convert single-family homes into multifamily units without authorization, and remove standard health and safety requirements. The available housing stock is often old and in poor condition, and some homes have deteriorated further because of neglectful landlords, leaving tenants to face mold, lead, and maintenance issues. For children in Franklin Park, high mobility, overcrowding, and homelessness have direct implications for their ability to attend and learn at school.

Other concerns within the neighborhood's built environment include limited recreational space for children, reduced safety, and unreliable public transit. According to one interviewee from a community organization serving Franklin Park, "There is no easy way [for residents] to get groceries," and there is a cost differential for residents: "the groceries on the edges of the neighborhood are more expensive than larger chains in the suburbs." Within the neighborhood, a Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alike, Valley Health Partners, and a Lehigh Valley Health Network clinic provide care for residents. Other resources and supports are located on the fringe of the condensed neighborhood or are farther away and hard to get to, such as the WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) office, the interviewee said. The neighborhood borders Allentown's Neighborhood Improvement Zone, which has received \$1 billion in investment to support community economic development in the area.³

Allentown School District Context

The Allentown School District is Pennsylvania’s fifth-largest district, serving 16,000 students in 16 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 3 high schools. Of these, three elementary schools significantly overlap with the Franklin Park census tracts: Hays Elementary, Luis A. Ramos Elementary (Ramos), and Central Elementary. Another 3,500 students in Allentown attend one of its five charter schools, none of which are in Franklin Park. ASD’s demographics reflect that of the city of Allentown. In ASD, all schools have a Title I provision for free and reduced-price school lunches for all children. As of the 2020–21 school year, according to our analysis of Every Student Succeeds Act data, 71 percent of students were Latine, 13 percent were Black, and 7 percent white.⁴ About a third of the district’s students speak English as a second language. The schools in Franklin Park have a similar demographic composition to the district overall.

ASD is a “walking district,” which has major implications for families and informs the district’s decisionmaking around new school facilities and boundaries.⁵ ASD does not provide school buses for students attending traditional public schools, except for students with disabilities and students experiencing homelessness, who receive transportation before and after school. Pennsylvania law does not require school districts to provide busing for students who attend traditional public schools. But the state requires districts to provide transportation to students who attend charter schools.⁶ ASD must fund and provide buses for children who attend charter schools within 10 miles of the school district’s limits if they live 1.5 miles from the school for elementary students or 2 miles for secondary students. Busing charter school students will cost the district about \$60 million over the next five years, according to a recently signed deal with a new transportation provider.⁷ Interviewees suggested that challenges for parents transporting students to school and concerns for the safety of children walking affect attendance and might explain why families are attracted to charter schools. As of fall 2024, ASD was piloting an initiative at two elementary schools to assess whether busing kids who live more than a mile from school improved attendance.

Changes in the district’s leadership and strategy might have influenced the process and decisionmaking for the new Hays Elementary. Interviewees emphasized that frequent superintendent turnover has affected continuity of the district’s priorities and approaches to community engagement. ASD had six superintendents between 2012 and 2024. The district underwent a superintendent transition in the middle of the planning process for Hays, around the time the land for the school was purchased. A 2024 audit of the district’s equity and inclusivity from the Howard Group noted that the superintendent turnover “contributed to the perception of a disconnect between initiatives and efforts within the district.”⁸ Although the superintendent changed during the planning for the new elementary

school, a core team of district leaders remained through the process, including the deputy superintendent, executive director of facilities, and executive director for elementary education, whose decisions were approved by the district's nine-member school board.

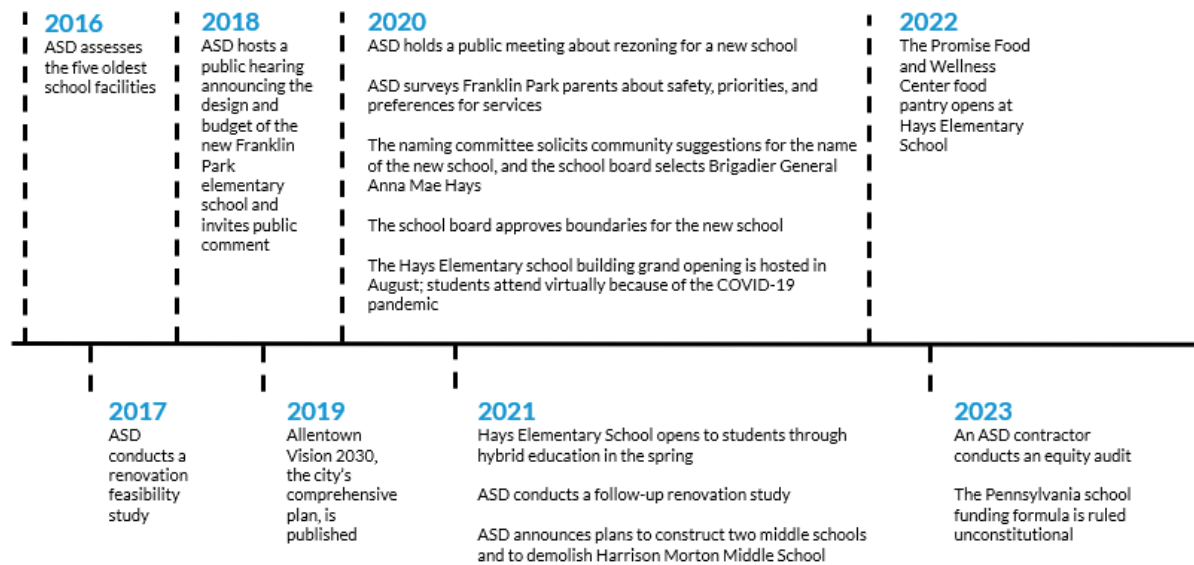
Amid the superintendent turnover, ASD's strategic plans provide a window into their larger goals and priorities related to facilities planning and community engagement. At the time of the planning and opening of Hays, ASD had a strategic plan in place for the years 2017 through 2021, which identified community engagement as one of the district's strategic areas and spelled out strategic actions the district envisioned as steps toward "collaborating meaningfully and deeply with families and communities" (Allentown School District 2017). The plan also acknowledged critical deficiencies in several school facilities and aimed to create a process for identifying and addressing infrastructure needs. The 2024 audit, designed to evaluate areas for growth to ensure equitable access to opportunities in the district, identified facilities conditions and community and family involvement as ongoing priorities. The district's plan for 2025 through 2030 has laid out several strategic actions to increase partnership and engagement with families and reiterated similar strategies as the previous plan to "ensure the physical environment and infrastructure foster safe and secure learning environments" (Allentown School District 2017). Each strategic action will have its own plan that identifies team leaders, available resources, and metrics for their progress.

Key Decisions in Allentown That Shaped Hays

This section lays out key decisions that shaped Hays's boundaries and design. For each set of decisions, we explore the processes, who was involved, what went well, and what did not go well. Figure 3 presents a timeline overview of major decisions and events.

FIGURE 3

Timeline of Events around Hays Opening



Note: ASD = Allentown School District.

Deciding to Open the School

Before ASD decided to open a new school in Franklin Park, the district was grappling with a portfolio of many old school buildings. Most were built before 1960—some were more than 150 years old and had never been renovated—and were in urgent need of investment or replacement to address deteriorating conditions and to modernize learning environments.⁹ But the district has lacked the funds to make these capital investments, constrained by its tax base, and has faced competition with charter schools and insufficient financial support from the state based on a funding formula deemed unconstitutional.¹⁰ Before Hays opened in 2020, the most recent new school building in ASD, Ramos Elementary, had opened a decade earlier in the same neighborhood. A few years after building Ramos, according to an ASD leader, the district wanted to invest in other facilities improvements, but it was a question of where to start and how to prioritize limited funds.

The district’s approach to creating a plan for facilities investments and new schools was driven primarily by fiscal analysis and feasibility studies conducted in 2016 and 2017 with Breslin Architects.¹¹ The 2016 analysis assessed the conditions of the five oldest buildings and was followed by a 2017 feasibility study that identified, based on a fiscal analysis, which schools should be prioritized for replacement. The analysis identified the two schools in the Franklin Park neighborhood—Cleveland

Elementary (built in 1883) and McKinley Elementary (1925)—as a high priority for investment. Their facilities were old, lacked elevators for accessibility, and had several issues, including unsecured entrances and mold.¹² Both schools had experienced fires, according to an interviewee. Overcrowding was another challenge, with hallways used for storage and, the interviewee said, some teachers using closets as offices. Given these conditions, the district was advised not to invest in renovations but to instead close and replace the schools with a new building.¹³ “At that point...fiscal analysis had shown that putting money into those was essentially not very responsible,” one district leader said. The district decided that a single, larger new school would replace the two elementary schools slated to close.

Facing what they understood to be pressing facilities needs, the district moved forward with two major decisions—close Cleveland and McKinley and replace them with a new school building—without first engaging the community for their input. After the decision to close and replace the schools was made, district officials informed families. The district hosted forums and mobilized community liaisons and community organizations to canvas the neighborhood and share flyers in English and Spanish. Ultimately, when families heard the news, they expressed a sense of loss around the closure of the schools and concerns around what it would mean for them, according to interviewees.

In retrospect, the fiscal analysis and feasibility study drove ASD to build Hays. Its approach—which focused on the most financially sound decisions it could make with a limited budget (i.e., Which property conditions are most urgent? Where is enrollment most strained?)—did not explicitly consider equity (i.e., Who is most affected?) or solicit input from the community on how to address its facilities challenges. Providing transparent information to families is an important part of community engagement, but the district might have missed an opportunity to engage families and community representatives earlier to weigh in on key decisions and their potential impacts. The implications of deciding to close two schools and open a new one might be long lasting, and seeking input could have helped build community buy-in that could have, in turn, affected school attendance and the utilization of the school’s services. In early community conversations, the district might have shared with the community a cost-benefit analysis or an explanation of the factors they were considering, with a desire to foster deeper conversations about potential trade-offs involved in opening a new school, and to provide a greater sense of community ownership over the decisions that directly affect their families.

Selection of Services for Community School

From the early phases of conceptualizing what the new elementary school would look like, ASD decided the school would include space to provide community services and resources. This would make the

school the first in Pennsylvania with an attached community services wing. One interviewee noted that although these plans for the school resembled a community school model, the district did not call the new school a community school at first and led planning for the services separate from the district's multipartner community school strategy.¹⁴ Later, United Way, the lead agency for the Lehigh Valley Community Schools Consortium, came on board to support the funding contract and provide technical assistance for the community school coordinator and principal at Hays.

In the school's development stages, ASD hosted community engagement sessions to identify community needs and determine what services would be offered at the new school, inviting community organizations, local businesses, and students' parents and guardians to give input. ASD wanted to make sure resources located in the school would address at least the top three needs community members had identified, one district interviewee noted. According to one interviewee who attended as a representative of their organization, there were five or six available dates and times to choose from, and participants were offered a gift card as an incentive to participate. This participant shared during the session that the families their organization served were looking for better access to food and health care, a challenge they said reflected the transportation barriers in Allentown. Although ASD was more successful at engaging representatives of organizations than they were at engaging parents and guardians, community organizations conveyed their clientele's interests. Outside these sessions, one ASD interviewee said the district engagement included a survey of families in what would become the Hays catchment area, which asked an open-ended question about what programs, partnerships, or services they would like to see in the new school. But this survey did not happen until early 2020, when the school was already under construction and set to be opened later that year. At the end of the engagement, the district identified five needs that would inform the community wing's design (table 2). The district decided that service providers would lease out the spaces, but the service providers shown in table 2 were not finalized until later in the planning process.

TABLE 2

Community Services Planned for the New School

Community need identified	Service to meet the need	Organization to provide services
Child care and early childhood education	Early childhood and Head Start program	Community Service for Children
Out-of-school-time care for students	Before- and after-school programs	Lehigh Valley Children’s Centers; 21st Century Community Learning Centers
Adult education	Adult education classroom space	Available for use by local organizations
Food security	Food bank	Second Harvest, Promise Neighborhoods of Lehigh Valley, and Community Action Coalition of Lehigh Valley
Affordable health care access	Health care clinic	Valley Health Partners

Sources: Stakeholder interviews; Amy Shortell, “Promise Food & Wellness Center Provides Community Resources,” February 2, 2023, <https://www.mcall.com/2023/02/02/promise-food-wellness-center-provides-community-resources-photos/>; Leif Greiss, “At Promise Center in Allentown, Community’s Health Needs Met with More Than Food,” *Morning Call*, May 30, 2023, <https://www.mcall.com/2023/05/30/at-promise-center-in-allentown-communitys-health-needs-met-with-more-than-food/>; and “Hays Elementary,” Lehigh Valley Children’s Center, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.lvconline.org/locations/allentown-child-care-locations/hays-elementary/>.

Feedback from interviewees on this engagement and decisionmaking process for the community services was mixed. Some interviewees felt the decisions reflected the voices of select community organizations, excluding some key partners and not asking for input from community members more widely. One interviewee said the community partners the district invited to the engagement sessions to give their input were those connected to Cleveland and McKinley before they were closed and that these were the partners the district ultimately brought on to provide services at Hays. “Those partners were brought in for conversations about what a community school would look like. They pushed their agenda forward, and they were the ones that ended up locating there,” the interviewee said. Another interviewee felt the district had navigated the service selection process outside the typical community schools structure because “they wanted to do it the way they wanted to do it, and they didn’t want to hear other voices suggesting alternative methods.”

The district’s efforts to bring key community partners and select parents into district conversations about the new school’s services might have been a good first step to gather input, but combining this approach with broader engagement of families and other partners could have been more inclusive and could have assessed community needs and preferences more deeply. It could have also provided an opportunity for the district to explain the budget and time constraints it faced given the conditions at Cleveland and McKinley. Although the survey fielded in 2020 might have reached more families, it was fielded too late in the planning process to be an authentic opportunity for community members to influence decisions about their school. Though we cannot know whether an expanded engagement

approach would have changed the final decisions, seeking input through community-led conversations or assessments of community needs might have made community members feel their voices were heard regarding what services would be offered and who would provide them.

School Site, Design, and Name Selection

Siting and facility design decisions for the new school were largely district and policy driven. In early 2018, ASD officials hosted a public hearing, as required by Pennsylvania’s Act 34, where they announced plans regarding the school’s design and proposed \$39 million budget.¹⁵ In advance of the event, there was an open opportunity for public comment, though it is unclear from our data collection what materials were shared for comment, whether these were available in Spanish, or whether there was outreach about the public comment. Later in the school’s development and construction, the district engaged community members around naming the school.

SELECTING A SITE

The district sought a site for the new elementary school that was located within the catchment area of the two closing elementary schools, Cleveland and McKinley, and that would satisfy state requirements. Pennsylvania’s Act 34, which establishes guidance for the sizes of lots that will be approved for new schools, states that 10 acres is “optimum” for an elementary school, but smaller sites can be approved based on “factors related to land availability, proximate shared use land, and other reasonable considerations.” As part of the feasibility study with Breslin Architects, the district identified a 2.5-acre, \$1.1 million property at 1227 W. Gordon Street in Franklin Park that could replace the schools and meet these requirements.¹⁶ The site, located at the edge of a residential area, was formerly industrial and, according to an interviewee and satellite images, had previously included a lumber store, an auto repair shop, a house, and vacant lots. This site was just a few blocks from the existing Ramos Elementary, falling within Ramos’s catchment area at the time. The school board approved purchase of this property in January 2017.¹⁷

DESIGNING THE FACILITIES



Source: Breslin Architects, photographed by Steve Wolfe.

The district and its design partners, Breslin Architects, set out to design the new elementary school facility with state-of-the-art, 21st-century standards and principles of “equity of access, safety, personalized learning, collaboration, and technology integration,” according to the firm.¹⁸ According to one interviewee, the new school was intended to last, whereas the most recent new-build, the neighboring Ramos Elementary, was built “to be a green school” but had experienced “wear and tear.” In some ways, however, the size of the school relative to the size of the lot limited design options. Building what was designed to be a 114,000-square-foot building on a 2.5-acre property was a challenge. According to one interviewee, the design architects said a school that size would normally sit on a 14-to-17-acre lot. City codes restricted the building’s height, limiting options for vertical space, so the school building was designed to sit close to three streets bordering the property. City requirements for the permeability of the property’s ground surface affected initial plans and reduced the area available for the playground, parking lot, and pickup and drop-off zones. Inside, “concessions had to be made,” one interviewee said, such as combining the gymnasium and cafeteria and placing the library directly above the gymnasium. When the larger plans for designs were presented to the community through the Act 34 hearing, some families were also concerned about the size, saying the school would block an area that was previously open.



Source: Breslin Architects, photographed by Steve Wolfe.

Ultimately, Hays was designed with two wings, each two stories tall, connected by a lobby and skywalk. One wing was designated for classrooms, including special education classrooms: two rooms for autism support and two for life skills support.¹⁹ The other wing would house the other amenities, with a multipurpose room (the gym, cafeteria, and stage), the kitchen, and a music room on the main floor and the library and art room on the second floor. The school would also include a 10,000-square-foot community services building attached but secured separately from the school. The spaces in this wing would be leased to and managed by service providers to meet identified community needs: early childhood education classrooms, an adult education space, a food pantry, an after-school care center, and a health clinic space. The district was involved in designing some of these community spaces, such as the early childhood education classrooms, but the health care provider selected through the district's request for proposals, Valley Health Partners, designed its clinic in the designated space with Breslin Architects. The building had two main entrances, with one for parents and one for school bus pickup and drop-off, a parking lot, and a 3,000-square-foot playground. Construction of the school by a local family-owned company was temporarily stalled in early 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the build ended up costing \$43 million, more than the \$39 million the district initially anticipated in 2018.²⁰

According to one interviewee, the new school design was a draw for families. When the building was completed later that year, the district hosted tours with families, which the interviewee said resulted in several students from the catchment area who did not attend their neighborhood school deciding to transfer to the new school.



Source: Breslin Architects, photographed by Steve Wolfe.

NAMING THE SCHOOL

To name the new elementary school, ASD created a naming committee that solicited community input, according to a district interviewee. The naming committee comprised board members, building administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community partners. The committee invited community members to propose name options through a survey, open in January 2020. “The deadline was extended, but there was engagement,” the interviewee said. Initial proposed names included Russell “Rooster” Valentini, a community member who had worked to address homelessness in the community for 30 years, and Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays, a woman who graduated from Allen High and served in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War before her presidential promotion to brigadier general in 1970. Using a rubric, the committee narrowed the name options down to three, which they shared with the community for a vote: Barack Obama Elementary, Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays Elementary, and Butz Elementary, after the local family-owned construction company that built the school. The results and the vote were presented to the

school board for their final decision. The board chose Hays, the first woman after whom a school in Allentown would be named.

According to a news article, despite the effort to gather community input, some community members were not happy with this selection. Some community stakeholders said Hays, who was white, did not reflect the community's diversity and largely Latine and immigrant student population. Some parents felt there had not been enough time to submit a name for the survey. Community leaders emailed the district and called for the naming process to reopen, but when the issue was raised during a school board meeting, the board voted to table.²¹ Ultimately, Hays's name stuck.

Zoning and Boundary Decisions

When drawing boundaries for schools, ASD follows its zoning policy and priorities, which are shaped in large part by Pennsylvania's school transportation policy. At one district meeting in June 2020, ASD described its zoning priorities as follows:

- build a plan around clearly defined goals
- maintain maximum enrollment continuity
- embrace collaboration and community engagement
- account for future growth
- consider diversity of educational classification (English language learners and special education)
- consider proximity wherever possible
- consider the safest route to school
- appropriately populate the new elementary school
- optimize programming in all schools

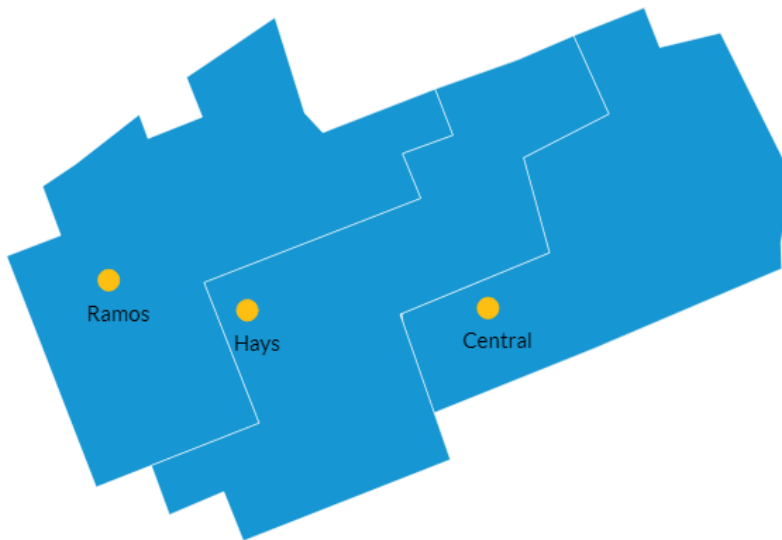
In practice, ASD must draw boundaries for a school to minimize the walking distance for students, as ASD does not provide buses, and consider both transportation and safe walking routes for students. The district also aims to ensure sufficient enrollment of students zoned to the school and nearby schools, accounting for potential growth with projections. Using Decision Insite, a tool owned by PowerSchool Software, ASD explores how potential boundaries affect enrollment by grouping different combinations of student addresses.

For Hays zoning, ASD juggled a complex set of geographic considerations. The goals for the catchment area were to keep students within the maximum walking distance and that students go to the nearest school without causing overenrollment. The district brought in a third-party organization to help draw the boundaries, which presented proposals to a group of district staff members. Given that the site of Hays was inside the Ramos catchment area and given that the other nearby elementary school, Central Elementary, needed relief from overcapacity, the redistricting team decided the new elementary school could capture Cleveland and McKinley's catchment areas and could relocate some students from Ramos and Central.

The district's proposal, as presented to the school board in June 2020, would affect several schools. Hays's catchment area would capture all students from Cleveland and McKinley, as well as a projected 44 students from Ramos (three blocks away) and 63 students from Central (six blocks). Figure 4 shows the new boundaries for Ramos, Hays, and Central. Table 3 shows the projected enrollment starting from June 2020 for Hays, Ramos, and Central under the new boundaries and accounting for new programs available for special education and kindergarten. Hays's special education classrooms would bring 33 students from the area to a closer program. In addition, because Cleveland and McKinley did not have kindergarten programs but Hays would, Hays would serve kindergarten students from the Cleveland and McKinley catchment areas who would have otherwise attended the nearby Jackson Elementary for the year. Fewer students attending Jackson's kindergarten program allowed the district to rezone kindergartners at other schools. Students in the catchment area for Sheridan Elementary, which does not have a kindergarten program, had previously attended kindergarten at Ritter Elementary but were rezoned to Jackson to improve capacity at Ritter. The school board unanimously approved the proposal.

FIGURE 4

New School Boundaries for Ramos, Hays, and Central Elementary Schools



Source: School boundaries were drawn from information available on Allentown School District’s website.

TABLE 3

Current and Projected Enrollment for a New Elementary School

School	2019–20 enrollment	2020–21 enrollment	2025–26 projected enrollment
New elementary school (Hays)	776	764	809
Ramos	727	722	750
Central	725	747	798

Source: June 11, 2020, Allentown School District School Board meeting, posted June 11, 2020, by Allentown School District, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/live/O_c3cl1HcrE.

Notes: In 2019–20, 44 students from Ramos and 63 students from Central were reassigned to the new school.

With a stated priority to embrace collaboration and community engagement, ASD made efforts to engage the community for input related to rezoning before proposing plans to the school board. The district’s approach to soliciting community input was multipronged. The engagement strategy’s rollout strategy began immediately before and into the pandemic’s early stages. The district hosted two in-person community forums in late February 2020, fielded a district-wide survey that was open from February through April 2020, and joined monthly parent meetings and after-school events at the four elementary schools in early March 2020. In June and July, after the school board approved the proposal, the district shared the redistricting decisions with the community. Reflecting on this process, some interviewees had concerns that the district’s approach to community engagement did not yield meaningful engagement.

One issue raised was the timing of the engagement late in the decisionmaking process. Some interviewees felt that engagement after boundaries were already drawn and had district buy-in was perfunctory. Discussions about drawing the boundaries and what priorities shaped the decisions did not include parents or community members. One interviewee who was in the loop during the process of drawing boundaries felt the district was more concerned about how the map looked than about how the decisions affected families: “It was kind of like, ‘Yeah, we’ll put those guys over there.’ It wasn’t a conversation of, ‘I wonder how it would wreak havoc if we move the line a bit over? Where were those kids at before? Were they at this school, or this school?’” In early 2020, when ASD fielded the survey to the Franklin Park neighborhood, they reached a 52 percent response rate (451 responses) through school-based outreach and canvassing by community partners. The survey’s content, however, seemed to ask parents about decisions that had already been made, including about services in the school. With respect to redistricting, the survey’s multiple-choice questions asked about safety concerns for students walking and respondents’ preferences for a new school or shorter walk. One interviewee said of this survey effort, “Then they would send out surveys and ask, ‘What do you think about this?’ But to me, that’s just checking of the box, doing what we were told to do, which is to get the input and feedback from the parents. Engagement would be going to the house affected and talking to the families.”

Another concern surrounded the district’s efforts to host in-person community forums, hosted at the local HOPE Church. During the sessions, parents spoke with ASD leaders about topics similar to what the survey covered, including programming for the school and concerns about changes in school assignment.²² One interviewee said the session times and locations were not convenient or accessible for families. Because the sessions were held at night, this raised safety concerns, and few sessions took place at the community school where families were comfortable. One interviewee noted that although a community member drafted flyers to advertise the sessions, the flyers used jargon and inaccessible language. Turnout was low: “There were often a lot of pizzas left over and a ratio of 3:1 district staff to community members that were showing up to these conversations.”

Ultimately, the district heard from families that safety and walking distance were major concerns. The combination of two catchment areas into a bigger school mean a greater distance for families; under the boundary proposal, some students would walk a mile to school. “Some families didn’t like that they had to go farther, and some were nervous about a much bigger building,” one interviewee said. “Going from 300 students to a building that can hold up to 900. Losing that small-school feeling, where that doesn’t necessarily happen as quickly in a larger school.” According to the survey feedback, when asked their preference between a shorter walk or a newer school, respondents were somewhat split: 37 percent preferred attending a new school, 33 percent had no preference, and 30 percent preferred a

shorter walk. Respondents raised concerns about the new school, including traffic on streets, lack of sidewalks, and longer walks. Based on conversations one interviewee had with families, they said, “I think the concern that a lot of the parents had who did speak up is why this line is now different, and my kid has to go to Hays but I’m closer to Ramos. And across the street from me that kid goes to another school. There was a lot of concern. And because the boundaries opened up, more children had to walk further distances. Attendance, safety, all of that is going to be an issue.”

It is not clear through interviews or our documentation whether this engagement influenced the final boundary proposal. Once the boundaries were finalized, however, the district made plans to maximize the safety of school routes. As with the infrastructure plans made for all schools, district officials mobilized a team that reviewed the boundaries and made decisions about which routes were the safest and closest, in collaboration with the police department and crossing guards. The team weighed, for example, whether it would be safer for some students to walk an extra block rather than cross a particularly busy street.

Early Outcomes



Source: Breslin Architects, photographed by Steve Wolfe.

Hays Elementary School construction was completed in fall 2020, but the facility did not open to all students until fall 2021, because of remote and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 114,000-square-foot building includes two facilities connected by the main office: one four-floor section designed to serve up to 850 children in kindergarten to fifth grade, and one two-story section designed to house service partners.²³ The facility also has a 3,000-square-foot playground and a 75-car parking lot. The school offers kindergarten and special education classrooms that were previously farther away at schools outside Franklin Park. The district has also used the adult education room and parking facilities for professional development training sessions, meetings, and parent engagement. One interviewee explained that the facilities are essential to changing outcomes for students: “[The school design is] bright, adds natural light, art rooms, and music spaces. They have spaces to do it, and instrumental storage, and they have outdoor space. It is so different from past schools.”

TABLE 4

Schools Attended by ASD Students in the Hays Catchment Area, 2024

School	Number of children	Percentage of children
Hays	710	85%
Another ASD school in Franklin Park	52	6%
ASD school outside Franklin Park	72	9%
Total ASD students in Franklin Park	834	-

Source: Data provided from the Allentown School District Sapphire to Predictive Enrollment Analytics.

Notes: ASD = Allentown School District. We do not have data for students who live in the Hays catchment area but attend schools that are not part of ASD.

In its first three years, Hays has struggled with the low student attendance that has plagued many schools across ASD and the country after the pandemic (Malkus 2024). Interviewees described Hays’s chronic absenteeism rate as higher than the district average, but the school had made “huge efforts” to address this and “ha[s] made strides” in reducing absenteeism. This effort includes an attendance committee composed of school principals, a truancy officer, a guidance counselor, and an outreach worker that reviews each student’s case, makes connections to families to discuss reasons they are missing school, and supports them to follow policy on excusing absences. As of 2023–24, 60 percent of Hays students had regular attendance, which was similar to neighboring school Ramos but still nearly 20 percentage points lower than the Pennsylvania state average (table 4).

TABLE 5

Hays Attendance Data Compared with Other Franklin Park Schools and the Allentown School District Overall

School	2023-24 regular attendance
Hays Elementary	60%
Ramos Elementary	64%
Central Elementary	48%
Allentown School District	46%
Pennsylvania	78%

Source: Every Student Succeeds Act report card.

Notes: Regular attendance denotes students who have missed less than 10 percent of enrolled school days across an academic year. All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Hays is a hub for services—including Valley Health Partners and the Promise Food and Wellness Center—which has increased the Franklin Park community’s access to resources. Valley Health Partners offers a medical clinic that provides immunizations and addresses other medical needs. One interviewee described how an on-site clinic like this can cut down on absences attributable to medical appointments and can speed up the process of getting a vaccination or a physical to enroll in school. The Promise Food and Wellness Center also offers a food pantry open three days a week and every other Saturday that offers users the option to order what they need on a mobile app for pickup and, according to one interviewee, feeds between 100 and 120 families.²⁴ Also located in Hays is an early childhood program and Head Start classroom. According to one interviewee, about 70 percent of the young children go on to attend elementary school in ASD, and 15 to 20 percent attend Hays. Young children and school-age children are also served by the Lehigh Valley Children’s Centers at Hays, which offers early learning programs and summer programs.²⁵ Hays is also home to a 21st Century Community Learning Center, which is open until 6:00 p.m. on school days to provide enrichment activities, academic supports such as tutoring, and a free meal.

With Hays’s opening came the permanent closure of Cleveland and McKinley Elementary Schools in 2020. ASD received multiple proposals for the properties, which the board reviewed. Officials approved a proposal in 2023 from Community Action Lehigh Valley to purchase Cleveland Elementary and build a state-of-the-art youth center with sports fields, classrooms, trade workshops, and a theater.²⁶ McKinley Elementary was nearly sold to an affordable housing developer, but the deal fell through and the building remains vacant as of early 2024.

Learning Opportunities

In this section, we draw lessons and takeaways from the Hays case that can support future action in Allentown and in other communities nationwide.

Deeper and More Sustained Community Engagement Can Lead to Better Decisions by the District and More Buy-In from the Community

Though ASD made concerted efforts to gather community input, planning for Hays could have benefited from more authentic and sustained engagement with the Franklin Park community. As ASD and other districts build, renovate, and close schools over the coming years and implement new strategic frameworks, they can consider the following strategies:

CREATE AUTHENTIC OPPORTUNITIES TO INFLUENCE DECISIONS

To foster opportunities for community members to meaningfully contribute to decisionmaking around school planning, engagement must happen early. Engagement should aim to (1) understand community members' ideas and concerns before making proposals and decisions, (2) incorporate community input into the plans or involve community members in making plans and decisions, and (3) communicate back to the broader community how their input was reflected in decisions.

In some decisions related to Hays, ASD began efforts to solicit community input early on, such as in the naming process for the school and the community forums regarding services. But one of the widest community engagement efforts—the community survey fielded in early 2020—happened in the late stages of decisionmaking. The survey, which touched on concerns related to walking to the new school and priorities for services at the school, was distributed after a boundary proposal was created and services had been selected for the school. With this timing, the survey did not give community members an opportunity to provide input that would have had the same leverage to influence decisions that it might have if the district had asked before drawing the boundaries, nor did it give community members the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposal. It is unclear—based on the district's communications—whether input collected through the survey and other community efforts at the time resulted in any changes to the already-drawn plans for boundaries, but it might have. To close the loop, whether collecting input early or soliciting feedback on a proposal, districts should communicate with community members about what they heard and how it shaped decisions.

PRIORITIZE ACCESSIBILITY OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

To reach and hear from more community members, school districts should use a combination of engagement strategies and meet families where they are. ASD used several approaches to reach Franklin Park residents, including canvassing to notify parents about the new school, hosting community forums regarding services, and fielding a survey. For strategies such as the community forums that had low turnout, ASD should consider how to address barriers to participation. For parents employed in warehouses who work long hours, offering multiple times and locations could help with time conflicts and transportation barriers. In the context of Allentown and Franklin Park, where many residents are Spanish speakers, language accessibility is also key, so events should be advertised and led in both English and Spanish.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

Authentic community engagement requires a foundation of trust between community members and the school district, particularly for members of marginalized communities. Part of building this relationship is having staff members and leadership who reflect the community's diversity. In Allentown, some interviewees felt that the white leadership from the district and city had only in the past 10 to 15 years begun to acknowledge Allentown's demographic shift and toward a community that is predominantly people of color. One interviewee involved in community focus groups with Franklin Park residents said community members wanted teachers and leadership that reflect the community. According to one interviewee, the new superintendent, who is the first African American female in the role, is making a concerted effort to bring in leadership of color.

ASD and other districts can also build trust with community members by communicating transparently and accessibly about decisions and plans. For example, in the case of Hays, ASD canvassed to let community members know about the decision to close two schools and open a new one. They might have missed an opportunity to inform community members about what went into that decision, for example, by sharing some of the cost analyses and factors they considered. Also, better communication about how engagement efforts shape decisions (recommended above) could help build community members' trust if they see that their input and expertise are heard, valued, and incorporated in school planning decisions.

ORGANIZE PARENTS AND SUPPORT COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

"I don't think families realize the power and voice they have as taxpayers who pay our salary," one ASD interviewee said. "There's not a big push to educate them on their power." As an important lever for community engagement, Allentown and other school districts can support organizing groups of parents

and community members and their involvement in school planning. Community members on leadership teams can reach out to others in the community, communicate the importance of engagement, and encourage parents to attend meetings and weigh in on choices that affect them.

Districts Need to Address the Backlog of Needs in Underresourced Schools with Limited Local, State, and Federal Resources

With a portfolio of aging school buildings and limited funds to address poor conditions, ASD must prioritize the most urgent properties for capital improvements, even though many need upgrades or replacement. With sufficient funding, Allentown could make greater investments in school infrastructure improvements, which have been shown to have positive impacts for both students and communities (Joint Economic Committee 2024). Safer and healthier school environments that are more conducive to modern learning benefit students' academic outcomes. Communities benefit from improved schools as community hubs, and sustainable infrastructure can help communities' climate resiliency and can save school districts money. These investments could also help improve interdistrict equity in school quality between Allentown and the surrounding districts of Lehigh County.

Most of Allentown's school buildings are at least 50 years old, and almost a third are more than 100 years old.²⁷ Since the completion of Hays, ASD has continued to identify and address facilities needs. In 2021, Breslin Architects conducted a facilities assessment that identified Harrison-Morton Middle School, a 150-year-old school serving Allentown's east-side students in sixth through eighth grades, as a top priority for replacement. ASD has indicated its plans to establish a capital plan that provides a road map for investments in schools. In 2024, Breslin Architects was hired to review facilities needs across the district and provide estimates for addressing them.²⁸ The district also prepared to hire a project manager for school district facilities projects (Allentown School District 2024). Allentown is identifying funding sources to support its plans.

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding consists of federal funds that became available during the pandemic to improve learning outcomes and supports for children. Funds were used in Allentown to install air conditioning in 10 buildings. They were also used to improve windows, vents, and other important systems.²⁹ Other federal funding opportunities exist under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides \$180 million for the Renew America's Schools Prize, designed to invest in energy-efficient and renewable energy infrastructure at underserved K-12 public schools and contribute toward the administration's

broader Action Plan for Building Better School Infrastructure.³⁰ The US Department of Energy has also created a \$500 million program to support energy-efficiency improvements to public schools.

Given the likely decrease in federal resources with the incoming presidential administration, state resources will be even more critical for Allentown. The State of Pennsylvania offers grant programs that could support Allentown, including the \$100 million Public School Facility Improvement Grant Program for school facility improvement projects of up to \$5 million, and the \$75 million Public School Environmental Repairs Program that supports projects up to \$10 million.³¹ The Public School Facility Improvement Grant Program is funding a \$2.5 million upgrade to the HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) system at ASD's William Allen High School.³² Increased resources for facilities complement Pennsylvania's recent increase in K-12 education funding. In 2024, the state increased school funding by a record \$1.1 billion. The additional funding does not fully address the funding gaps recognized as unjust by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2023, but it will be allocated according to an adequacy formula designed to address need at underfunded public schools. ASD's basic education budget was expected to increase by 6.7 percent, and its special education budget was expected to increase by 10.1 percent (PHAC 2024).

Appendix. Case Study Approach

This appendix reviews our decision to focus the case study on Hays Elementary and Allentown, describes our data collection methods, and discusses potential limitations.

Selection of Case

We decided to focus one of our case studies in Allentown, Pennsylvania, because Enterprise had a strong existing partnership and technical assistance engagement with a local organization, the Pool Institute for Health. As part of the Lehigh Valley Health Network, the Pool Institute for Health works to address the social determinants of health in Allentown to improve economic mobility and health outcomes. It is a convener and source of community data to advance safe and affordable housing, food and nutrition access, and a robust cradle-to-college or career pipeline. Its partnership with Enterprise aims to support the development of place-based, cross-sector partnerships between housing, health, social services, and other stakeholders in the Franklin Park neighborhood. Franklin Park, which is located near downtown Allentown (census tracts 18 and 20), is a focus area for the Pool Institute for Health, as the community experiences significant health disparities and has one of the lowest life expectancies compared with the rest of the city, according to Pool Institute for Health data analysis (Enterprise Community Partners 2022).

Collaboration with this local partner in Allentown informed our case study with local expertise and allowed us to design a case study that would contribute to its work locally. In support of the work to foster cross-sector partnerships that advance health equity, Urban's case study would examine the case of a school opening, with a focus on equity and cross-sector housing and education collaboration, identifying ways the local housing and education systems interact to shape opportunities for students and ways that stronger collaboration could promote equitable student outcomes. Urban consulted with the Pool Institute for Health and Enterprise to select the case focus and together settled on the recently opened elementary school Hays in the Franklin Park neighborhood. This case was relevant to the Pool Institute for Health's geographic focus and goals, and with their deep knowledge and relationships in the community, it was able to provide background knowledge and connections in support of Urban's research.

Data Collection and Analysis

This case study weaves together data from desk research, stakeholder interviews, and school data.

1. **Desk research.** Before collecting primary data, we searched for and reviewed publicly available district documents, news media, and census data. We also reviewed documents stakeholders provided during interviews.
2. **Stakeholder interviews.** Based on our desk research and guidance from the Pool Institute for Health, we identified key stakeholders representing education, housing, and community organizations serving Franklin Park who had been involved in or knowledgeable about the new Hays school and the Franklin Park community. With input from our partners, we designed an interview guide tailored to each interviewee. Between January and June 2024, we conducted six interviews: three with staff members or leadership from ASD, two with representatives of community organizations, and one with a leader from the housing sector. After analysis, our partners provided feedback on our preliminary findings to ensure they were accurate and complete.
3. **School data analysis.** In support of the Enterprise and Pool Institute for Health collaboration and to provide context for our case study, our team analyzed school data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data and Pennsylvania Every Student Succeeds Act State Report Card. We compared the enrollment, attendance, achievement, and demographics of schools within and outside Franklin Park and the district overall.

Limitations

Despite our best efforts to produce the most complete and nuanced account of Hays's opening through stakeholder interviews, document review, and local partner input, we acknowledge that our case studies might still be incomplete or missing context. The study was limited in scope, and interviews relied on retrospective recall from the past eight years. In addition, our desk research was limited to what resources we could find online and from interviewees. Communities have varying levels of school district transparency and of media coverage for school facilities discussions and planning, and this could affect what was available for this story in Allentown.

Notes

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- ² Tori B. Powell, “What Allentown, Pennsylvania Can Teach Us about the Changing Face of America,” CBS News, July 8, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/insurrectionist-movement-race-demographic/>.
- ³ See the website for the Allentown Neighborhood Improvement Zone Development Authority at <https://allentownniz.com/>.
- ⁴ Black students and white students referenced here are not Hispanic/Latine.
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- ¹² Jacqueline Palochko, “Under New Suggested Boundaries, Some Allentown Elementary School Kids Would Have to Walk a Mile to School,” *Morning Call*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.mcall.com/2020/06/12/under-suggested-new-boundaries-some-allentown-elementary-school-kids-would-have-to-walk-a-mile-to-school/>.
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- ³² Office of Representative Peter G. Schweyer, “Allentown Lawmakers Applaud over \$6.56 Million in State Funding for Local School Emergency Projects,” news release, October 22, 2024, <https://www.pahouse.com/Schweyer/InTheNews/NewsRelease/?id=135884>.

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